

A R C H A E O L O G I C A L

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D a d a

Archaeological Urban Dada

This exhibition was organized by Eugenie Tsai, Branch Director

September 29–November 29, 1995

Whitney Museum of American Art at Champion



David Hammons *Untitled*, 1989

...let's imagine that everything was destroyed and a new race or a new group of beings came to our planet and they tried to discover our culture through the things that were left, and they find my works of art. So I have totally changed everything and nobody will ever know the truth. In my imagination, that's what I'm doing. I sometimes think of it as archaeological ethnographic Dada.

—WILLIE COLE

"Archaeological Urban Dada" was inspired by Willie Cole's remarks about his art—sculptures made from irons, hair dryers, shoes, gas pumps, and other castoff items salvaged from the dumpsters, thrift stores, and streets of urban America—and the relationship of his art to culture. The exhibition presents Willie Cole, David Hammons, Edward Kienholz, and Pepón Osorio, four artists from different generations and ethnic backgrounds, who assemble sculpture from a wide range of found materials that have little monetary value, but bear a wealth of cultural associations. Like Marcel Duchamp, their spiritual forebear, who exhibited an upended urinal on a pedestal in 1917, these artists recognize the aesthetic potential and cultural connotations of "readymades" and found objects. Like Duchamp, they understand the significance of displacement—of displaying these "artifacts" in a museum, where they are not normally housed.

"Archaeological Urban Dada" reconsiders and updates the American tradition of assemblage sculpture. During the 1950s, artists began to reject what many felt had become the clichés of Abstract Expressionist painting. Densely layered webs of paint and slashing gestural strokes, so authentic and spontaneous as images of psychic conflict in the work of Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, had given way to generic painterly brushstrokes as an accepted formula to convey the angst-ridden inner self in the modern world. In response, artists such as John Chamberlain, Richard Stankiewicz, and Robert Rauschenberg began to assemble objects from auto bodies, machine parts, tires, and stuffed goats, in order to reaffirm their allegiance to an art that was grounded not in the artist's psyche but in the experiences of everyday life. Their attitude was succinctly summed up by Rauschenberg's statement that he wanted to work in the gap between art and life. The materials now considered appropriate to art making were enumerated by artist Allan Kaprow in an essay of 1958, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock":

Objects of every sort are materials for the new art: paint, chairs, food, electric and neon lights, smoke, water, old socks, a dog, movies, a thousand other things which will be discovered by the present generation of artists. Not only will these

bold creators show us, as if for the first time, the world we have always had about us, but ignored, but they will disclose entirely unheard of happenings and events, found in garbage cans, police files, hotel lobbies, seen in store windows and on the streets....²

Although assemblage artists distinguished themselves from the Abstract Expressionists by constructing their art from the very stuff of everyday life, they nevertheless shared their predecessors' concern for the formal qualities of color and gesture—but now extended into actual space. As Kaprow's statement implies, assemblage has always been an urban art form. Assemblagists tended to "embrace the actual look and feel of the city—its construction sites, crumbling walls, trash piles, and empty lots strewn with discarded clothing, lumber, machine parts, and so forth."³

Cole, Hammons, Kienholz, and Osorio would certainly endorse Kaprow's list of materials and Rauschenberg's desire to work in the gap between art and life. That gap acknowledges both materials drawn from daily life as well as the process of transforming these materials into something other than the merely quotidian. These artists do not seek to "objectively" capture the raw and scrappy look of the city, but rather engage in an ongoing study of culture. They refer to and comment on these cultures by their choice of materials—of "artifacts."

I really begin to understand any society by going through its junk stores and flea markets. It is a form of education and historical orientation for me. I can see the results of ideas in what is thrown away by a culture.

—EDWARD KIENHOLZ⁴

Edward Kienholz, the senior artist in the exhibition, died in 1994 at the age of sixty-seven. Born in 1927, he is the only artist in the exhibition who matured artistically under the domination of Abstract Expressionist painting. He grew up on the West Coast on a farm and moved to Los Angeles, where he went to a series of colleges before opening a succession of avant-garde galleries. Kienholz never attended art school. Although he began as a painter in an Abstract Expressionist style, he gradually turned to assemblage. In 1961, he started to make tableaux, such as *The Wait* (1964-65), three-dimensional environments based on actual social situations and institutions.

The Wait recreates the cozy look of a living room or parlor, with floral wallpaper above dark wainscoting, a bird cage, a lamp with a fringed shade, a braided rag rug, a footstool, sewing basket, and a table bearing numerous family photographs. In the midst of all these accoutrements of middle-class domestic comfort, a woman sits on a large, throne-like chair, holding a cat in her lap. Death and decay belie the initial appearance of material comfort in this room. The woman is a human skeleton draped in clothing, the cat on her lap is dead, and



Edward Kienholz *The Wait*, 1964-65

the wallpaper behind her is stained and soiled with age. A live parakeet in a cage beside her heightens the sense of ossification. The contrast presented by her skeletal body and the framed photograph of her softly rounded youthful face set in front of the skull conflates past and future lives.

In part a reaction against Abstract Expressionism, Kienholz's assemblages and tableaux rejected aestheticism. As Maurice Tuchman wrote in 1966:

The consistent element in Kienholz's work since his relief paintings has been the use of junk materials. When artists on both coasts turned to the use of junk materials in the late fifties, a common tendency emerged: to transform the lowliest of material into elegant and beautiful shapes.... In fact, the more successful the sculpture, as in work by sculptor John Chamberlain, the less it seemed to depend on the fact that the material once had been junk. In contrast, Kienholz makes no romantic attempt to transform his material into precious stuff. He accepts the qualities of age and usage—he is touched by the history every object exudes, "all the little tragedies are evident in junk," he once remarked—but he changes one essential characteristic: to junk the symbol of imminent death, Kienholz lends permanence.⁵

In addition to its raw physical qualities, Kienholz's work also had a sharp undertone of social commentary. Robert Pincus recently observed that "Kienholz's early assemblages and tableaux were informed by the same passionate disgust with American society of the 1950s that we find in Allen Ginsberg's poetry and William Burroughs's fiction."⁶ Indeed, *The Wait* exposes the isolation of old age in white middle-class America, and the false promises of the American Dream—the distance separating material success and personal happiness. In his indifference to aesthetics, and his concern for social critique, Kienholz sets the tone for "Archaeological Urban Dada."

I was actually going insane working with that hair so I had to stop. That's just how potent it is. You've got tons of peoples' spirits in your hands when you work with that stuff. The same with the wine bottles. A Black person's lips have touched each one of those bottles, so you have to be very, very careful.

— DAVID HAMMONS⁷

Three works by David Hammons—*Untitled* (1992), branches wrapped with human hair, *Kick the Bucket* (1988), a ring of empty Night Train bottles, and *Untitled* (1989), strung bottle caps and broken records—demonstrate the artist's preference for found objects with a past. From them he assembles pieces that evoke earlier lives, although without the narrative implications that characterize Kienholz's work.

In 1963, the twenty-year-old Hammons arrived in Los Angeles from Springfield, Illinois, to study art. He soon began to study with Charles White, a printmaker who came of age in the 1930s whose work focused on African-American subjects.



David Hammons *Untitled*, 1992

From the early sixties and through the mid-seventies, Hammons produced technically innovative “body prints,” in which he smeared himself with margarine or other grease and left his own imprint on a board. The image was then sprinkled with chalk or powdered pigment. A critical and commercial success, these framed works usually kept the viewer at the traditionally accepted distance. *Injustice Case*, however, depicting the seated artist bound and gagged (inspired by Bobby Seale and the Chicago Seven, accused of violently disrupting the Democratic National Convention in 1968), was originally part of a larger environmental setting; the entire ensemble was pronounced by one critic “at the very least to equal some of the tableaux by Ed Kienholz.”⁸

In the early seventies, while still producing body prints, Hammons began to move away from the frame. In the spirit of Dada, he experimented with found objects. The spade, a common household tool in garages or gardening sheds, appealed to Hammons for its multiple meanings, verbal and visual. It is also a suite of cards as well as a derogatory term for African-Americans. Although the abstract shape had already appeared in the body prints, Hammons began to use actual garden spades to create wall sculptures and to play a role in improvisational performances. From spades, he moved on to work with greasy paper bags, bones left over from barbecues, and human hair. In the mid-seventies he left Los Angeles for New York.

From afar, the gracefully arcing boughs of *Untitled* (1992) resemble cattails. Closer inspection reveals that they are branches wrapped with human hair. Set among a small cluster of stones, they look like dreadlocks sprouting from human

heads. Hammons' choice of hair as material for his art dates back to the mid-seventies, when he, like many other artists, began to make ephemeral "anti-art" from throwaway materials, an American parallel to Italian *arte povera*, with its emphasis on humble materials. Although Hammons calls hair "the most unbelievable fiber I've ever run across," and *Untitled* can be appreciated for its formal elegance, hair is the part of the human body that most visibly projects the individual's image and social aspirations. Indeed, like Hammons' body prints and spade series, *Untitled* refers to African-American culture. The hair is collected at barbershops with a predominantly African-American clientele. In interviews, Hammons has discussed the various meanings of African-American hair, including its formal purity and its cultural specificity.

Along with *Untitled* (1992), *Kick the Bucket* (1989) and *Untitled* (1989) effectively demonstrate Hammons' almost magical ability to transform the dross of the streets into the poignant poetry of human lives. In the process, he also examines racial and cultural stereotypes.

Overloading is an important facet of my work. I play a lot with abundance, with the philosophy that more is better....It is very important because it speaks about abundance. It deals with Puerto Rico today; with the worries about shortages witnessed by our parents during World War II; it concerns the fear of recession, of depression—be it emotional, individual or economic.

—PEPÓN OSORIO⁹

While Hammons collects hair from African-American barbershops, Pepón Osorio focuses on the barbershop as an institution, particularly in regard to the concept of machismo in Puerto Rican and other Latin cultures. His barbershop chairs are encrusted with inexpensive kitschy trinkets that cover familiar objects to give them a new identity. Unlike Kienholz and Hammons, Osorio purchases items in pristine condition from discount and novelty stores. Critic Coco Fusco notes that the materials used in his work refer largely to life-styles and trends of the 1950s and 1960s, when the majority of islanders now living in New York migrated.¹⁰ The results are breathtakingly ornate objects that have been totally transformed from the ordinary into the spectacular.

Osorio was born and raised in Puerto Rico, arriving in New York in 1975 at the age of twenty. He attended Lehman College for the next few years, studying sociology. At the same time, he began to meet artists and to make art. In 1980, the year he began to work at the Human Resources Administration Department of Special Services for Children, he also started to participate in performances at alternative spaces in New York. In 1985, Osorio decided to work more directly with Caribbean popular culture and his own life. *The Bicycle* (1985), an ordinary bicycle embellished with plastic swans, fruits, and flowers, marks this decision.



Pepón Osorio *Angel: The Shoe Shiner, 1993*

The work is a tribute to the vendors, knife grinders, and other workers in Puerto Rico who decorated their means of transportation with great personal style. Next, Osorio produced environments somewhat like Kienholz's tableaux. *The Bed* (1987) recreates a bedroom with linoleum floor, gold and pink walls, and an abundantly decorated four-poster bed. The installation pays tribute to Osorio's nursemaid as well as to his wife. While the decorative extravagance of his work delights the eye, it is also a deliberate critical strategy that transports the vernacular aesthetic of Puerto Rican homes to galleries and museums.

The embellished red velvet barbershop chairs were not made to be seen in the isolation of a gallery but as part of a larger installation entitled *En la barbería no se llora* (No Crying Allowed in the Barbershop). This installation, at the site of an abandoned barbershop in the Frog Hollow neighborhood of Hartford, Connecticut, recreated the interior of a barbershop as a theater where rituals of masculinity are established and enacted.¹¹ The barbershop chairs provide an armature for adornment. In keeping with recent developments in Osorio's work, the human presence is evoked with parts of the body stenciled onto the chair and with footage of men in various situations playing on a small video monitor atop the headrest. Like Hammons, Osorio sometimes works on the street, directing his efforts to an audience that does not visit museums. On the street, the gap between art and life becomes more difficult to identify.

Angel: The Shoe Shiner (1993) pays homage to a specific blue-collar worker whom Osorio had met on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. The large throne for the customer—decorated with miniature plastic shoes, among other items—highlights the social distinctions between Angel and his clients, who can afford to have someone perform this menial task for them. A video image at the top of the throne shows Angel spitting on the shoe, an accepted practice to achieve a high shine. The lower monitor shows Angel's quick back-and-forth movement with the cloth across the shoe. The act of spitting, which appears functional, also suggests the resentment of a man who shines the shoes of bank presidents, as well as the ritualistic act of cleansing oneself of that anger. In any case, Angel is shown in a spiritual light, with pink wings attached to his back.

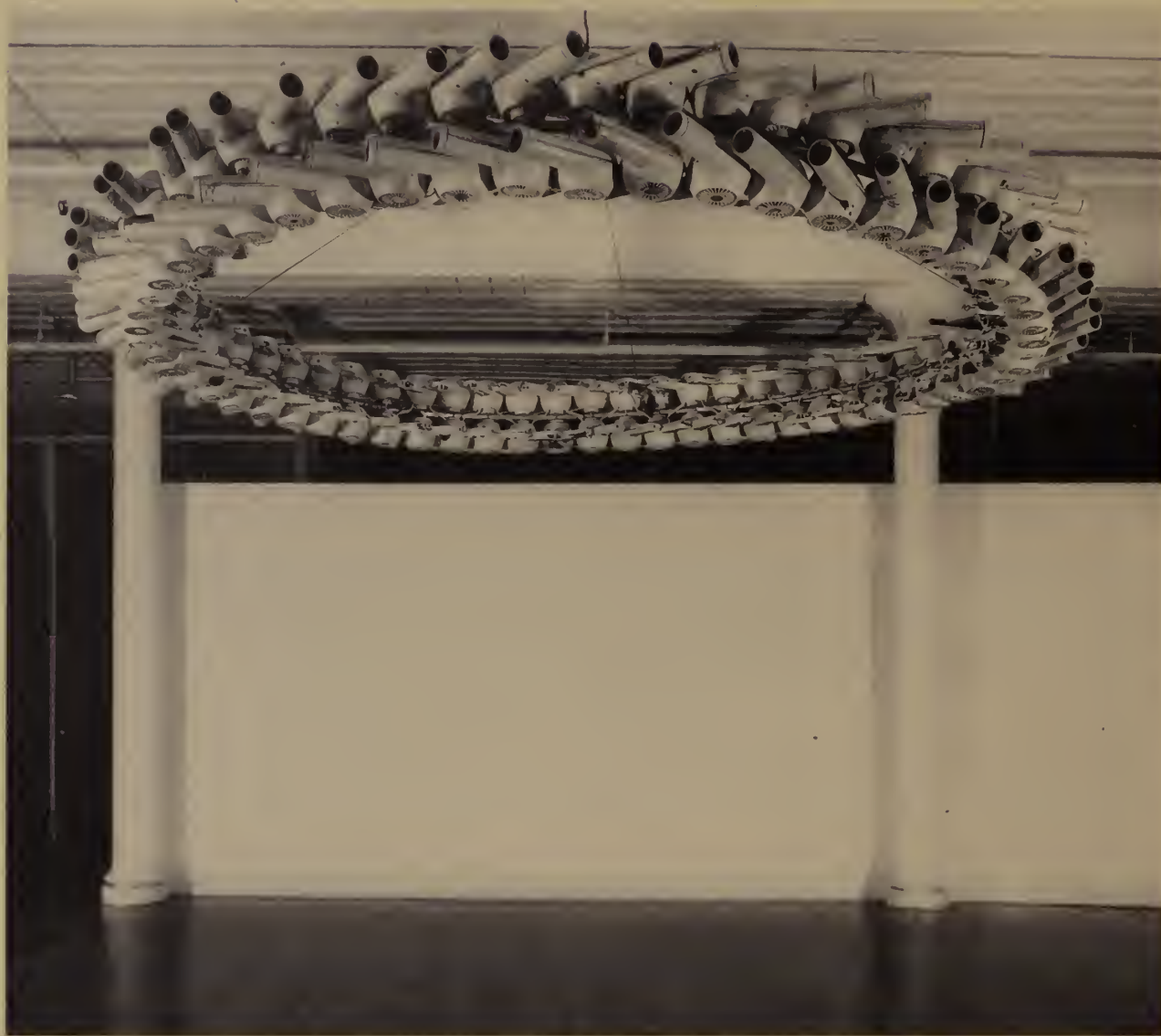
I think that if you buy an object—a blow-dryer or stapler or anything—and you use it for a few years, you become kind of dependent on it. So the object obtains a life from that: it has a memory. When you throw it away, it is still out there remembering its past. So I bring it here to turn it into art. I still like to keep the memory of the object, the integrity of the object.

—WILLIE COLE¹²

Willie Cole's assemblage sculpture reflects his origins in New Jersey, a state known for its industrial wastelands and capacious shopping malls. Cole's art initially referred to African-American culture as well as to African art. As his work



Willie Cole *Gas Snakes*, 1992



Willie Cole *Air in Remission*, 1991

has evolved, his references have broadened to include Tibetan art. Cole has expressed a desire to "show that there's a world culture" by creating art that looks like it's from another culture and another time, even though the materials in the work are strictly American.¹³ These investigations draw parallels between artifacts from different cultures and eras.

Cole graduated in 1976 from the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan. He initially worked as a graphic designer in an illustrative style. Gradually, he began to produce objects that reflected his interest in African art. These efforts culminated in a series of masks and figures ingeniously assembled from irons and their components—heating coils, iron stands, handles, and cords—which coincided with Cole's yearlong residency at The Studio Museum in Harlem in 1988-89. The following year, the iron became a tool used to produce a series of "scorches," in which the imprint of the iron was seared onto an ironing board, resulting in distinctive patterns. Cole regarded the scorch series in relation to colonial slave-shiping diagrams, African shields, and Yoruba cloth-dying methods. An offshoot of the scorch, *Domestic Impressions, I-IV* (1993) shows a recent variation of the process. The imprint of the iron is left in an old drawer filled with plaster. Each drawer is shown with another as a diptych, a form often found in Christian altarpieces. As such, the pieces take on a ritualistic aura.

Although Cole continued to work with irons, both as object and tool, he experimented as well with other available household items, such as hair dryers he found in an abandoned factory near his studio in Newark. *Air in Remission* (1991), an 8-foot wheel assembled from hair dryers, and *Wind Mask* (1990), a face formed by turning hair dryers at different angles, are two examples. Cole thought of the wheel as a mandala and the hum of the motor as a chant: "At the point it was completed in the studio I sat in the middle of it and got involved in the chant of it, and it is a mandala for clean air."¹⁴ Tapping into the "spirit" of the objects is another of Cole's concerns. The heat of the irons suggests fire, while the blowing of the hair dryers suggests wind.

Gas Snakes (1992), an example of Cole's recent work, shows a Surrealist bent, with familiar gas pumps unexpectedly metamorphosing into serpents. *Made in the Philippines III* (1994), a chair bristling with hundreds of spiked heels from women's shoes, makes a witty topical reference to Imelda Marcos' well-known predilection for collecting shoes, while its spiney surface discourages viewers from sitting.

From the works on view, it is clear that Cole, Hammons, Kienholz, and Osorio operate in the gap between art and life, carrying on a practice begun by Rauschenberg in the 1950s. By bringing their diverse experiences of both artistic traditions and real life to the history of art, these artists also fill a long-standing gap, creating a more representative and diverse view of both art and life.

Notes

1. Willie Cole, "Interview," in *Social Studies 4 + 4 Young Americans*, exh. cat. (Oberlin, Ohio: Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, 1990), p. 18.
2. Quoted in Roni Feinstein, *The "Junk" Aesthetic*, exh. cat. (Stamford, Connecticut: Whitney Museum of American Art, Fairfield County, 1989), pp. 3, 6.
3. Ibid., p. 6.
4. As quoted in David Scott, "Edward Kienholz: An Introduction to the Works," in *Edward Kienholz: Tableaux 1961-1979*, exh. cat. (Dublin: The Douglas Hyde Gallery, Trinity College, 1981), p. 8.
5. Maurice Tuchman, *Edward Kienholz*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1966), p. 8.
6. Robert L. Pincus, "Critical Assemblages: The Kienholz Tableaux," *Art in America*, 78 (June 1990), p. 159.
7. Quoted in Kellie Jones, "David Hammons," in Russell Ferguson, et al., eds., *Discourses: Conversations in Postmodern Art and Culture* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1990), p. 211.
8. Joseph E. Young, "Los Angeles," *Art International*, 14 (October 20, 1970), p. 74.
9. Félix Joaquín Rivera, "Why More Is Better," in Susana Leval, *Con to' los hierros*, exh. cat. (New York: El Museo del Barrio, 1991), p. 37.
10. Coco Fusco, "Vernacular Memories," *Art in America*, 79 (December 1991), p. 101.
11. Real Art Ways, Hartford, Connecticut, commissioned and produced this project, July 16-September 16, 1994.
12. Cole, "Interview," pp. 16-17.
13. Ibid., p. 17.
14. Ibid.

Works in the Exhibition

Dimensions are in inches; height precedes width precedes depth.

Willie Cole (b. 1955)

Air in Remission, 1991

Hair dryers, metal, wire, and electricity, 96 diameter
Alexander and Bonin, New York

Air Mask: Elephant, 1991

Assemblage with hair dryers and fake fur, 15 1/2 x 24 x 22
Alexander and Bonin, New York

Gas-Snakes, 1992

Gas pump nozzles, rubber hose, and construction reinforcement, 4 parts, 65 x 24 x 27 each
Collection of Penny and David McCall

Domestic Impressions I-IV, 1993

Plaster and chicken wire in printer's drawers, 8 parts, overall dimensions variable
Alexander and Bonin, New York

Made in the Philippines III, 1994

Shoes, pvc pipe, wood, 38 x 48 x 41
Alexander and Bonin, New York

David Hammons (b. 1943)

Kick the Bucket, 1989

Old wine bottles in a loop, bucket and coal, overall dimensions variable
Collection of Alice and Marvin Kosmin

Untitled, 1989

Bottlecaps, wire, broken records, rubber balls, rubber tube, 59 x 27 x 4
Collection of Susan and Michael Hort

Untitled, 1992

Copper, wire, hair, stone, fabric, and thread, 60 high
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from the Mrs. Percy Uris Bequest and the Painting and Sculpture Committee 92.128a-u

Edward Kienholz (1927-1994)

The Wait, 1964-65

Epoxy, glass, wood, and found objects, 80 x 148 x 78
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of the Howard and Jean Lipman Foundation, Inc. 66.49

Pepón Osorio (b. 1955)

Angel: The Shoe Shiner, 1993

Painted wood, rubber, fabric, glass, ceramic, shells, painted cast iron, two video monitors, two color videotapes, hand-tinted photographs, paper and mirror, overall dimensions variable
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from the Painting and Sculpture Committee 93.100a-d

En la barbería no se llora (No Crying Allowed in the Barbershop), 1994

Three decorated barber chairs, 63 1/2 x 60 x 60 each
Collection of the artist

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at Champion**

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